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ABSTRACT

For students in broadcast education, it is important to be exposed to some of the industry's more successful film writers, directors, and executives. This kind of experience gives the student a sense of reality, informs him of the latest industry trends, and provides vital contacts--the first step in finding industry employment. Though the University of Texas does not have the advantage of being located in Los Angeles or New York, it has managed to provide students with first hand experiences through vigorous correspondence, occasional conference calls, and a series of guest lecturers. (EMH)

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UTILIZING PROFESSIONALS IN BROADCAST EDUCATION

by

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USING PROFESSIONALS IN BROADCAST EDUCATION:
TRIALS, TRIBULATIONS, TRAUMA - AND RESOUNDING SUCCESSES

When I was teaching at the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute in Los Angeles, the professional resources seemed endless - especially in retrospect. The location of the Institute, and its dedication toward professionalism, attracted such prominent guests and alumni as Stanley Kramer, Rod Steiger, and Steve McQueen. Other professionals, not as well known, but equally important to the industry, visited regularly. These included television and film writers, directors, and executives. It was obvious that the professionals enjoyed the experience as much as the students and faculty. Dustin Hoffman, for instance, spent over four hours talking to a group of students when he was originally scheduled for one hour. Shelley Winters, who started as a guest lecturer, is now teaching a class herself.

The interaction of professionals in education is a rewarding experience, from all standpoints. For the guest, it allows expression and exploration of personal ideas and perceptions, without fear of studio feedback. For the student, it provides a unique awareness of current trends, practices, and policies; it allows a realistic framework for discussion and analysis of current issues and problems; and, of course, it provides a potential "contact" - the first crucial step in finding industry employment. It does something, too, for the school. It provides an image of industry consciousness, awareness, and prestige. That image is not to be taken lightly - it is the very source of quality student enrollment and potential scholarship support.

But what happens when schools outside the "gifted" circle of L.A. or New York strive for an active program of professional-academic interaction? The answer may be determined by the specific locale of the school, its departmental

commitment and prestige, and the creative and financial resources of the university.

When I first joined the University of Texas, a year and a half ago, I was concerned that the student contact with professionals would be limited. However, the department has encouraged these contacts. For example, they've allowed long-distance phone conferences between students and Hollywood writers, producers, and executives. We have, in essence, bridged the fifteen hundred mile gap between Austin and the media centers of Los Angeles and New York.

Several classes have benefited from these conferences. My writing class, for example, has access to stories and scripts from current movies-of-the-week, and network series. During our phone conversations, they can intelligently discuss the problems of translating the script to screen, with both the writer and the producer. Our programming class, through discussions with advertising and network executives, gain insight into the latest ratings and programming trends.

Industry contact, of course, it not just limited to telephone conversations. On more than one occasion, a student has been able to meet our guest in person, arrange for a job interview, a story conference, an acting audition, or - on a less grandiose scale - get a guided tour of studio facilities.

The visitor to campus provides us with other types of opportunities. The professional offers screenings and discussions of his work, informal "rap" sessions, creative workshops, and even mini-internships, if he happens to be shooting on location.

A related facet of professional interest in education lies in the realm of internships, scholarships, and grant possibilities. Norman Lear's company,

for example, returned an honorarium to the university and established a student production grant. The first recipient, a graduating senior from Australia, produced and directed a one-hour children's television show as a special project under my supervision. It was wrutteb bt a playwright - in-residence, and it utilized the diverse interdisciplinary skills and talent available throughout the university and the community. It was truly an ambitious and professional effort.

Although as educators we seek the benefits of a full and complete program of professional - academic interaction, we must be aware of potential problems. One major incident occurred last semester which threatened to set back our entire program. I think that the matter should be discussed, since it serves as a red flag warning.

An executive friend at one of the networks agreed to stop off en route to an East coast conference to visit one of my classes in Austin. He was a very welcome speaker and the session was highly rewarding to the students and faculty. Unfortunately, a novice student reporter was jotting down some off-the-cuff comments, and reported them the next day in the campus newspaper. The story was totally naive and distorted in its interpretation of the event. But even worse - it was incredibly picked up by VARIETY. In its own inimitable fashion, VARIETY's TV headlines screamed out:

"NETWORK EXEC LETS IT ALL HANG OUT"

The opening paragraphs set the alarming tone for the whole incident:

> "There is something about the clear-eyed youth of America, peering up with eager respect in a college classroom that induces network nabobs to say things that are rarely heard on Sixth Avenue.

> "Why else would (a) network VP last week tell a U of Texas Radio - TV class that "NBC management simply has no sense of humor. They don't have the skills for comedy.'
>
> "There is a chance of course that (his) candor stemmed from a notion that his forthright comments were secure inside the classroom and would not be blown around like tumbleweed in a storm. His talk, however, was reported next day in the University's DAILY TEXAS ... and has subsequently tumbled into VARIETY's New York office via the West - -to-East tailwind.
>
> "Having no sense of humor, NBC brass are not likely to see anything funny in (his) characterization of (the) network; (nor CBS), which he called 'Wall Street oriented', worried about profit margins in stocks; (nor) ABC, which he said is 'chaos running and screaming.'"

My friend's supposed characterization of management structures at NBC, CBS, and ABC were based on a class discussion of Les Brown's book, TELEVISION: THE BUSINESS BEHIND THE BOX. The reporter apparently never heard of the book, and let the paraphrased references to the text pass him by. He quoted the speaker, instead, as the source of these ideas.

I don't need to tell you that the moment my friend arrived back in L. A. he was virtually dethroned. He was at the receiving end of venemous phone calls for two weeks straight. Executives at all of the networks expressed outrage over his offhanded remarks to a bunch of "clear-eyed youth peering up at him in a college classroom." In no uncertain terms, his job was very much on the line - simply because he spoke with students. He was totally unaware (as was I) that there was a novice reporter in the room.

Since that time, I learned that the reporter was not a staff member of the University paper, but was an undergraduate student who was on "an assignment" for some Journalism class. He knew nothing about broadcasting; he knew nothing about the talk itself before entering the clasroom. Students in my own class complained that he kept asking for interpretations of what was being said. He also left tne classroom in the middle of the session, and, according to one of

my students, returned about half an hour later to catch up on his "notes."

The incident had a direct and unsettling effect upon the availability of other professionals to talk on campus. Several close former colleagues refused to participate in any discussions - even on the phone - with college students. If, indeed, they lectured, it was only P. R. and Pablum - but not pragmatics. I'm told that the incident sparked a certain notoriety for the University of Texas - one which we could do without. In L. A., they referred to it as "The Texas Affair."

Fortunately, the turmoil surrounding the incident has subsided in recent months - but the ramifications are still quite serious for those of us who wish to expand and enrich the use of professionals in education. We broadcast professors must provide a climate which fosters the free expression of thoughts and idea; we must provide an atmosphere which is conducive to a meaningful dialogue between our students and the industry.

As we look at the use of professionals in broadcast education, we must realize that few resources an provide such an important and relevant link between theory and practice. That very interaction reinforces and complements all we share with out students in the classroom. Here is a prime source of educational wealth - one which deserves our protection as well as our appreciation.